

FFO

UFMCC's Commission on Faith, Fellowship and Order was formed three years ago to provide a forum for discussion of some of our community's basic questions about faith, theology and biblical

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What is theology?
How does it relate
to the Christ Story?

Every person is a theologian. Every declaration about God is a theological statement — even the denial of God's existence.

Theology is thinking about God and our relationship to God. It is the human attempt to know and describe God. It is reflection on the human experience in relationship with the Ultimate and the Infinite.

Theology says that it is not enough to recite pious phrases and Biblical verses. To do theology is to get at the meaning of these phrases and verses. We have all heard pious phrases like "God bless you" and "God loves you." These are not theological statements per se. A theologian would step in and ask, "What does it mean that God blesses us?"

"What does it mean that God loves us?" The Bible states that God raised Jesus from the dead. The job of theology is to take this Biblical affirmation and to answer the question, "What is the importance of God raising Jesus from the dead?" "What is the meaning of this event?" To do theology then is to reflect on the statements of faith. It is using our minds to try to understand and to interpret rather than just repeating a belief, or a pious phrase, or a Biblical verse.

Theology falls into two categories — natural and revealed. Natural theology tells that God is;

interpreted. At the 1975 General Conference, FFO was charged with presenting a paper this year in Washington focussing on six major questions. Since then, District FFO workshops and local churches have studied, discussed, and debated the six questions about MCC's mission and theological task. Here is the Commission's "interim report", adopted by the Conference for study during the current year.

revealed theology tells us *who* God is.

Natural theology is that which we can know about God and God's ways through observation of, and reflection upon, the universe. However, there are things about God that we cannot know through observation and reason. They must be revealed to us. This is the basis of revealed theology. We can find out for ourselves that there is a God. It must be shown to us what this God is like and what this God purposes.

Jesus the Christ is God's revelation in history. The God who is

revealed in Jesus Christ is the same God who has been revealed from the beginning to the patriarchs and the prophets. This revelation continues for us in the Church which is the living Body of Christ — the continuation of the incarnation. Therefore, our thinking as Christians about God must be in the context of God's self-disclosure in Jesus the Christ. The unique revelation of God upon which Christianity relies is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was God revealing God in the clearest possible way.

The historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ is mediated to us through the Holy Scriptures. Our present reflection about God must be consistent with the Jesus proclaimed in the Scriptures.

God's continuing revelation in Christ is known through the people of God. In the Church's Scriptural teaching and preaching of the Christ Story, and in the continuing experience of the Risen Christ through the Church's worship and loving service, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Looked upon in this light, theology is a never-ending task. It is never ended because being a human endeavor it must use human concepts and human words. The thought structures and language of humans are always changing, and thus theology is always changing. The basic truth and faith behind theology remain the same. The Bible and the historical traditions of the Christian Church remain the same. The



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however, which inter-
 given basics is always
 and developing. There is
 a theology for three
 First, we grow in our
 in our relationship with
 Second, because we progress
 understanding of the given
 we develop better tools
 to study the Bible,
 history, tradition, etc.
 Third, human culture
 is changing, and we
 ways to communicate
 to other people so that
 understand it. The task
 is to explain our faith
 message to the people in
 that they can understand.
 The way theology is done
 is always changing to
 that task.

2 What is the theological task of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches?

Theology is a human attempt to
 and describe God. Through
 theological process we study
 God's ways, and God's
 with humankind. Theol-
 ogy is not enough to
 pious phrases, Bible verses,
 elements of faith; to do
 is to get at the meaning
 of phrases, verses and
 elements of faith and their im-
 plications for the Church today.
 Define the theological task
 of the Universal Fellowship of
 Metropolitan Community
 Churches means to state the areas
 of theological concern MCC
 will be asking itself and the
 Church. We must begin
 by exploring the personal revela-
 tion to Troy Perry and
 others now in our corporate
 worship. To adequately ap-
 prehend this, we must remember
 that revelation is God's self dis-
 closure to humanity about Him/
 self. The initial revelation was
 that God does love everyone, in-
 cluding gay men and women; the
 continuing revelation is that God
 calls the church to exist in this
 world to live and proclaim that
 message.
 The theological task is then,
 and: (1) to determine the

implications of God's universal
 love for our church's life and
 ministry; (2) to determine the
 implications of God's revealing
 that message through a church
 composed of worshipping com-
 munities constituted primarily of
 gay Christians. Our theological
 reflection, however, about MCC as
 an instrument of God's revelation
 must be evaluated in the light of
 God's revelation in Christ Jesus.

Suggested areas of concern to
 explore are:

(1) *Ecumenism* — To bind to-
 gether a group of believers from
 diverse religious traditions pri-
 marily because of sexual identity.
 MCC is attempting to be an ecum-
 enical fellowship, i.e., to adopt
 a statement of faith and corpor-
 ate expression that is both co-
 hesive enough to bind us to-
 gether into a community of
 Christians but open enough to
 allow for individual beliefs.

(2) *Human Sexuality* — To say
 that "God accepts everyone, re-
 gardless of their sexual orienta-
 tion," does not adequately ex-
 plain the relationship between
 sexuality and a Christ-centered life.
 Again, the above quote is a pious
 phrase that needs to be explained,
 e.g., What does it mean to be ac-
 cepted by God? What is sexual
 orientation? Is every sexual act in-
 cluded? If not, what determines
 which acts are and are not? What
 does it mean to be sexual? To be
 Christian? To be both?

(3) *Prophetic Mission* — The
 message of our fellowship is
 prophetic in that it may chal-
 lenge some of the traditional
 views of the Judeo-Christian heri-
 tage.

(4) *Human Liberation* — We
 often hear from the pulpits of
 MCC that Christ Jesus is our
 Liberator. In itself, to say that
 "Christ Jesus is our Liberator" is
 not a theological statement but a
 "pious phrase" on which we need
 to do theology to find the deepest
 meaning. To get this meaning we
 must ask certain questions, e.g.,
 From whom or what does Jesus
 liberate us? How does Jesus liber-
 ate us? Is this liberation only a
 future event, i.e., "pie in the sky
 by and by," or does Jesus liberate
 us now? Is Jesus only concerned
 with "spiritual" liberation? Does

the liberation that Jesus offers
 have anything to do with the li-
 beration movements, e.g., Black,
 Latino, Native American, Gay,
 Feminist, of today? If so, how
 much and in what ways? Once we
 begin to answer questions like
 these, we can then begin to say
 that we are developing a theology
 of human liberation, i.e., we are
 discovering what the deepest im-
 plications of what it means to say
 that Christ Jesus is our Liberator.

3 How do we define the community to which we are called to minister?

Current discussion about the
 community to which MCC is
 called to minister has begun to
 polarize into two identifiable
 views:

(a) On one view, MCC's com-
 munity of ministry includes all
 humanity. Since it is a Christian
 Church, its missionary efforts and
 resources must be directed toward
 all people. There may be no im-
 plication of exclusivity in our
 ministry.

(b) On the other view, the
 community that MCC is called to
 serve should be defined as pri-
 marily, but not necessarily ex-
 clusively, the Gay community.
 Since many churches are unable or
 unwilling to faithfully preach to
 Gospel to Gay people and do not
 effectively respond to their spiri-
 tual and social needs, then Gay
 persons must have the oppor-
 tunity to seek their own worship-
 ping communities. Despite noises
 to the contrary, this definition of
 community has been the one that
 most people in MCC have im-
 plicitly accepted. They have done
 so with uneasy conscience, be-
 cause it appears to be contrary to
 Scriptural demands. Since Christ's
 Church is for everyone, then all
 Christian congregations must re-
 flect that all-inclusiveness in their
 constituency. Thus the problem
 facing us in responding to this
 question is the dilemma of ap-
 parent Scriptural demands versus
 sociological reality.

Sociological reality has, in fact,
 placed persons in community.
 MCC must, therefore, relate not

only to persons as if isolated, *persons-in-community*. The Church's mission involves creating and sustaining of community. If by *community* we mean individuals seeking mutual development of God-given potential, our task has begun.

Says, the Christian community is beginning, a becoming: never perfect completion.

Yet we must speak of *community* in a variety of senses, for we have recognized, persons *in community*. By *community* we mean a central, ministering core group; we may mean a Church community of persons whose intensity of involvement is not equal; or we may speak of even wider communities in which we may be called to minister in direct or remote ways. Every existence is a ministry to the total world community. A recognition of this total family of God's children, in communion with God or estranged, is one meaning of the word "ecumenical."

We may, therefore, speak of *community* as persons related to spiritual communion in Christ. We may also speak of persons whose spiritual core we have not heretofore reached, but whom we may nevertheless minister at other levels. We must say to any person, "What do we do with you?" for all earth's people are related in human community, and all are potential objects of the Church's ministry.

In each response to the question of the definition of MCC's community of ministry, an important theological concept is central:

(a) The first answer chooses the inclusive nature of the Christian Gospel as the decisive theological consideration. If racial or ethnic minorities and others have been discriminated against elsewhere, this position is, it must not be so here. MCC must be a model for integration and nondiscrimination.

(b) To the second answer, the central theological concept is the notion of election: a called and chosen people, on the model of calling of Israel or the es-

tablishing of the Church. In both instances a group of people, who for the most part were previously uncommitted to one another in any significant manner, shared a common experience of having their oppression/slavery transformed into liberation by the divine hand. Each community found motivation for common commitment to one another on the basis of their common liberation experience. Each was commanded to keep the relevance and power of the liberation experience alive by reflecting on it, as a *community*, in the format of worship. Similarly, to challenge the theological legitimacy of Gay people forming a worshipping community separate from the wider institutional religious community is to challenge God's wisdom and right to act as S/He will.

These two themes — inclusion and election — now find themselves set in opposition. But the opposition is only the clash of a generally understood idea (inclusion) with one often tragically misunderstood (election). We must examine the latter, for its proper understanding is pivotal to our consideration.

Israel continually struggled with the concept of election. In a positive vein, the prophets proclaimed the purpose of Israel's election to be a "light to the nations." On the other hand, Israel, propelled by a distorted election-consciousness, attempted to exterminate the Canaanite people — whom it viewed as rejected and unacceptable before God. Genocide against Jews, Gays, and others has been the consequence of distorted notions of election; an example is the case of Nazi Germany — Hitler only sought to carry out what churches had been preaching for centuries. If a group thinks of itself as specially chosen "insiders," it is likely to become self-righteous and to conclude that the non-elect have no right to exist.

The Christian's model for "election" is Jesus. He understood his calling as a call to servanthood. Jesus was a servant, recognizing the value of every person and every person's poten-

tial relatedness to God. Historically, however, the Church, like Israel, has often misunderstood its election. Therefore it has needed prophets to lift up the election model of Jesus the Christ.

The community of faith may be expected to share a common experience, commitment and call. While it must never be exclusionary, it may reflect a sociological commonality. But if it is Christian, it does not exist for itself. The moment it does, it misunderstands election and becomes a threat to every "outsider." Jesus came to include every outsider, every victim of oppression. We must make common cause with all oppressed people, precisely because of our particular call.

We must learn to understand oppression in all of its forms as that which inhibits realizing of one's potential for relatedness to God, the self and the neighbor.

It is likely for the foreseeable future that our congregations may be largely Gay in composition. That is congruent with our call and our beginnings. But also congruent with our call is the fact that we exist for the world. Our very existence is a prophetic witness to the world and the Church.

To seek to serve *only* the "Gay community," however, is not only a misunderstanding of our call; it is also a misunderstanding of our humanity. We must learn to discard our limiting categories for human persons, and recognize that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, straight nor gay.

4 How might we focus or bring to bear the Christian Gospel on the needs of the community we have defined?

The Christian Gospel is the "Good News" that God comes to us in Christ, speaks to us, and acts for us and through us in unconditional love. The Gospel can and must reach into human existence at every point. Because that is our affirmation, we dare to focus and bring to bear the Christian Gospel on the needs of the community.

we have defined.

First of all, what needs are we speaking of? Certainly not the need of isolated individuals or an abstract "community," but the need of individuals-in-community. We might speak of three inter-related needs:

(1) The need to deal with where we have come from — our brokenness, our sin, our pain, our struggles, our fears, failures, hopes and dreams. This is the need for acceptance and healing.

(2) The need to know and decide who we are in relationship to God, to ourselves and others; to experience the dynamic transformation from "no people" to "the people of God"; the need to respond to God's calling us out, recognizing our own uniqueness, and our common createdness.

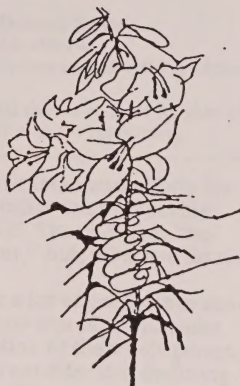
(3) The need to decide where we are going — where God is leading us. What is our purpose, our mission? All people need to be challenged to give what only they can give. "We must believe in destiny, and that it stands in need of us" — Martin Buber, theologian.

How do we focus the Gospel on those needs?

(1) Through *Prophetic Criticism* — Through the Holy Spirit, prophecy notes the "signs of the times" and speaks the truth in love. The task of prophetic criticism is to liberate theology from intellectualism, dogmatism, shallowness and elitism; and we must invite every person to join us in a "grass-roots" (i.e., coming from our own experience), innovative, dynamic, open, Spirit-filled theologizing community. Our method of theologizing is based on the continuous interplay of action and reflection. The data for our concrete theologizing comes from real-life situations, when we come up against brokenness, fear and despair in our brothers and sisters. Prophetic criticism seeks to shatter false idols that keep us from God, such as materialism, dogmatism, and all forms of false security and religiosity.

(2) Through *Prophetic Creativity* — The Gospel clearly states that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

We might also say "All are oppressed and are in need of God's liberation." All persons must identify and face their own oppression, with the additional realization that when one person is oppressed, all are oppressed. The recognition of our own oppression, in whatever form, affords us the great opportunity to bring the secular and the sacred into a new dynamic relationship. Not that our oppression itself makes us more worthy of God's love; rather, it makes us more receptive to God's love.



We must embrace with a sense of certainty the knowledge that the Spirit is indeed about a "new thing" in our history, and that there is nothing any of us can do to make it happen or to stop it from happening. We can simply listen to the Spirit, who still speaks in the Church, and respond, enriching our lives and those of the community we serve. To do so is to rediscover the power of Pentecost. To fail to do so is to relegate ourselves to irrelevancy. What God is doing in our midst in the freedom and power of the Spirit is the meaning of our lives.

We must therefore:

(1) Structure times, places and resources for reflection on ultimate concerns, and for corporate celebration of the relevance, power and authority of the Gospel to transform lives and peoples; worship, and a flexible, dynamic approach to education must lie at the heart of our ministry.

(2) Structure an environment in which community and person-

hood may flourish: where people are free to ask, "Where have we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?"; where people can experience the process of acceptance, healing, growth, challenge and commitment; where people can realize the free gift of the grace of God-in-Christ, and be challenged to true discipleship.

(3) Assume a stance of advocacy for all oppressed peoples, making clear the connection between gay persons and all persons, between gay oppression and all oppression — and finding in Jesus Christ the chief Advocate of all the earth's peoples.

(4) Honestly explore and develop our understandings of ethics and lifestyle in relationship to the Gospel.

(5) Do the day-in, day-out work of love and caring by reaching out and serving the very complex and pluralistic community around us.

5

How might we reflect or manifest that focusing task our worship?

(To be reported on at the 1977 General Conference)

6

What is the unique emphasis of the Christian ministry of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches?

Human sexuality has been MCC's point of entry or "door" to our mission. This church came into existence affirming that homosexuality is a valid manifestation of the divine creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God. Thus, sexuality is a gift of God. From the beginning MCC has preached that gay people, along with all people, share the benefits of God's grace.

Jesus taught by his example that human sexuality is to be dealt with in the same way as any other aspect of humanness. In contrast, human beings, ever since the fig leaves of Adam and Eve, have considered sexuality with fear, shame, and awe. Further-

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THE GAY CHRISTIAN

A journal of
theological
reflection
from Metropolitan
Community Church

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energy thus saved into efforts for the responsible use of sexuality, as Jesus did. Thus it is not, "be-gone sinner," but, "Go, and sin no more."

Putting a lot of energy into suppressing one area of life impedes the liberation of the whole person. There, we consider that de-fusing tension in the area of sexuality will result in release of immense amounts of energy for living a fully Christian life. It will at the same time lead to liberation from the compulsion to establish rigid, legalistic rules and boundaries in other areas such as dogma and morals in general, where aggressive "righteousness" and "judgmentalism" now often prevail.

2. Human sexuality has been MCC's point of entry into our mission, but what does our sexuality have to do with our Christianity?

We recognize that sexuality is an essential aspect of our personhood, an aspect that cannot be ignored or separated from the rest of our humanness. By this MCC is emphasizing that we cannot find spiritual, mental, or physical wholeness unless we deal affirmatively with our sexuality.

But, our sexuality is not and should not be the focal point of our lives. An important emphasis of the Christian ministry of MCC is that everything in our life, including our sexuality, must center on our relationship with God through

faith in Jesus the Christ. MCC emphasizes that sexuality is part of the whole self which is called into a relationship with God who is the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustaining Spirit.

3. In carrying out its mission, MCC emphasizes the Gospel message in unique ways that bring a new credibility to God for many people who once felt estranged from a "Policeman in the Sky" type of God. MCC emphasizes a God who accepts, a God who cares, a God who makes self-acceptance possible.

This ministry places a unique emphasis on God's love for everyone, for this is a God who does not discriminate — this is a God who first loved us.

This God becomes relevant in the Jesus who related to Samaritans (foreigners), women (who were considered inferior), lepers (social outcasts), sinners (supposedly rejected by God), and other rejected elements of society.

MCC preaches that God loves and accepts all, not "God loves you if . . ." MCC does not put an "if" or a "but" on God's love.

God loves us regardless of what we are or are not. We need to love the uniqueness, difference of others as God loves us, despite, or perhaps because of, our differences. We need, therefore, to love others because of what they are and what they are not.

